

NORTH VIETNAM

ELECTIONS TO NORTH VIETNAM NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

On 11 April this year, North Vietnam (NVN) held nationwide elections of deputies to the National Assembly, Fourth Legislature. A total of 420 deputies representing 80 constituencies were elected. Those elected included, as expected, the top leaders of the [North] Vietnam Workers [Communist] Party (VWP).

Elections are not a regular feature of North Vietnamese politics. They have been held rather infrequently since the elections to the First Legislature of the National Assembly in January 1946. The Second Legislature was not organized until May 1960, the First Legislature having extended its constitutional term of four years because of the war. The Constitution — first promulgated in November 1946 but amended in December 1959 — provides that "in the event of war or other exceptional circumstances, the National Assembly may decide to prolong its term and take necessary measures to ensure its activities and those of its deputies." The elections to the Third Legislature were held on schedule in April 1964. The elections to the Fourth National Assembly should have taken place in 1968, but the deputies of the Third Legislature adopted, in May 1968, a resolution extending their term of office on account of what they described as "circumstances in countering the destructive war against the North." The same resolution also granted to the National Assembly Standing Committee (NASC) the power to organize the elections of deputies to the Fourth Legislature "when the situation allowed."

With this authority, the NASC adopted a resolution on 8 February this year calling for the holding of the elections to the Fourth Legislature on 11 April. At the same time, a "Council for the Election of Deputies to the National Assembly, Fourth Legislature" headed by Truong Chinh — Politburo Member of the VWP and Chairman of the NASC — was organized by the NASC to supervise the preparation and conduct of the elections. The Third National Assembly at its seventh and last session, held 2 to 4 March, endorsed the NASC resolution and announced the expiration of the term of the Third Legislature.

Subsequently, the Election Council sent its cadres to various areas "to explain to the people the significance of the elections, to urge the citizens to vote, and to educate them on the role of the National Assembly." Propaganda leaflets on these subjects, particularly on the work of the National Assembly, were also freely distributed.

The need for the information campaign on the National Assembly is clear when the actual place of this entity in the governmental set-up is examined. According to the Constitution, the National Assembly is supposed to be "the highest organ of State authority" through which "the people exercise their power." As such, it is theoretically responsible for a number of functions which include the enactment of legislations, the election and removal of the President, Vice-President, Premier, and other high-ranking officials of North Vietnam, policy formulation on several issues, economic planning and financing, and several others which are normally discharged by other institutions in other countries. However, in reality, it is not as powerful as the Constitution purports it to be. This is because in any communist system the State apparatus is subordinated to the Communist Party and therefore serves merely as a rubber-stamp entity of the latter. All State decisions and policies — political, economic, military, or otherwise — are determined beforehand by the party. One has only to look at the record of the Third Legislature to see how insignificant and meaningless the National Assembly is. Throughout its extended term of seven years (1964–71), the Third Legislature was able to hold only seven sessions of very short duration (or roughly an average of one session annually) despite the constitutional directive that the National Assembly must meet at least twice a year. Apparently, the poor showing of the Third Legislature prompted Truong Chinh to ask the deputies, in his speech closing the seventh session of that Legislature, "to clearly realize our [deputies'] weaknesses and shortcomings so as to be able to improve our work and serve the people in a better way." Again, President Ton Duc Thang, on the same occasion, could find little to say about the specific accomplishments of the Legislature and had to content himself with indulging in wide but vague generalizations about alleged gains in "building socialism" in the country and in the "continuing struggle to achieve peaceful reunification of Vietnam."

As is customary in communist regimes, the candidates for the election were predetermined and selected by the communist parties concerned. This is done by the VWP through the [North] Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). The VFF is the third front organized by Ho Chi Minh — the first two fronts being the Viet Minh and the Lien Viet, respectively. As a VWP front, the main objective of the VFF is to gain support in the South for "re-unification" with the North on communist terms.

Apparently to justify this practice, the North Vietnamese media mounted an intensive propaganda campaign prior to the elections, feverishly describing the VFF as the "broadest mass organization embracing the various social classes and strata of the people" and adding that the nomination of candidates by the VFF was necessary "to help the people choose really worthy representatives more correctly." To further portray a "democratic and more respectable" image in the manner of the selection of candidates, the VFF held so-called "consultative conferences among the workers, peasants, socialist intellectuals, minority peoples, people's armed forces and cadres," and picked from among them those who "have scored achievements in production and combat, have met ethical standards, have demonstrated the spirit of revolution, and are worthy of being the people's representatives." However, in reality the choice of candidates is an exclusive prerogative of the VWP, since the VFF is under the absolute control of the VWP and is therefore under obligation to follow faithfully the dictates of the party.

Another favorite play employed by the communists to show "free and democratic" elections is to allow a limited number of other persons, apart from those endorsed by the party, to run as candidates. Thus, during the recent National Assembly elections, seven "independent" candidates out of a total number of 529 reportedly contested the elections "on their own initiative." However, this gesture of "liberalism" becomes meaningless when it is considered that this number is so insignificant that it cannot in any way affect the election outcome desired by the party; it merely represents a token show of a democratic process.

Political campaigns as practised and understood in the Free World were totally lacking in the North Vietnamese elections. There was really no need for the candidates to campaign since the voters had virtually no choice but to vote for the candidates nominated by the VWP. The VFF organized instead rallies and meetings in the different constituencies between the candidates and "representatives" of the voters. On these occasions, the candidates were simply "introduced," although in some instances (as in the case of lesser-known personalities) the "introduction" was accompanied by a circulation of leaflets and posters containing lengthy summaries of the biographies of the candidates.

The speeches delivered by the candidates, echoing in general the party line, were substantially focused on "the need to remain vigilant, to completely defeat US aggressors, to accelerate the construction of the material and technical bases of Socialism and to achieve peace, independence, freedom, and happiness for the people." At least by implication, the speeches of top VWP leaders threw light on the enormous economic difficulties and security problems posed to NVN by its direct involvement in the Indo-China conflict. Truong Chinh, in his address at a Hanoi meeting of candidates, stated that NVN has been trying to "strengthen economic management" and to motivate the people to "work in a disciplined manner . . . to economize and to actively step up production." He also called on the people to "increase revolutionary vigilance, to firmly maintain order and security, reinforce the people's air-defense system and make comprehensive preparations for the defense of the capital." Truong Chinh's statements, made in the wake of reports that troops of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) were making preparations for an invasion of North Vietnam (during the height of "Operation Lamson 719"), can hardly be interpreted as an ordinary exercise in electoral rhetorics. More significantly, they convey a clear feeling of insecurity and inadequacy in the event of an actual RVN thrust into North Vietnam.

Apparently, the holding of the April elections was a matter of urgent concern for NVN in the light of recurring reports about the loosening of political discipline and ideological consciousness of the people. From time to time party leaders have published commentaries and theses accusing both the rank-and-file and upper echelons of the party organization of "inferior work performance, declining ethical standards, and slackening revolutionary fervor." This theme was very obvious in the pre-election speeches of the candidates and statements published by North Vietnamese media. For instance, the *Nhan Dan* editorial of 10 February stated that "the election . . . is an important event in the . . . improvement of the political consciousness and development of the mastership of our people." It went on to exhort all citizens of electoral age "to enthusiastically participate in the elections, seriously abide by the law, and correctly use their right in elections and possess a sense of responsibility in choosing their representatives . . . (they) must study and more clearly understand the nature and organization of our State, heighten the sense of respect for the Constitution, correctly implement the policies of the party and the State, heighten our spirit of militant solidarity . . . and worthily contribute to our people's revolutionary undertaking."

As might be expected, North Vietnamese propaganda media boasted about the alleged heavy turnout of voters on election day and "the enthusiastic participation of candidates from all walks of life." A *Nhan Dan* editorial on 29 April claimed that 98.88 percent of the registered voters cast their votes, representing a slight increase over the turnout in 1964 when the figure given was 97.77 percent. This increase was reported by the North Vietnamese as a sign of the "improving citizenship-consciousness" of the people. However, the emptiness of these rather impressive figures is apparent, when it is appreciated that under a totalitarian rule the people had no choice but to follow the directives of the ruling authorities lest they become what the VWP would call "degraded elements of society." Veiled threats of punishment for those who did not vote were evident in the party's propaganda messages during the pre-election period.

Reports showed that among the 420 deputies elected were 91 "workers," 90 "collective peasants," 125 women, 82 army personnel, 72 minority nationals, 8 religious leaders, and 5 "patriotic personalities;" some deputies belonged to more than one of these categories. The list of the successful candidates also reportedly includes all the 366 deputies of the Third Legislature and the top leaders of the VWP. Except for the women's group, which has more than doubled its number of seats in the incoming legislature, the representation of the other groups has not been radically altered. One possible reason for the increase in women's representation is to generate enthusiasm for government among the traditionally apathetic North Vietnamese women. To a certain extent this could be a sign that NVN is gradually disengaging its men from purely governmental affairs to enable them to devote their time to combat duty and production work, in the hope that this will serve to alleviate the recurring military and economic difficulties of the regime.

One significant feature of the incoming legislature that will distinguish it from the previous ones is the absence of "southern deputies" who had nominally represented constituencies in the Republic of Vietnam. The seventh session of the Third Legislature adopted a resolution which declared, among other things, the expiration of the term of the 91 deputies allegedly "elected by the southern people" in 1946. This resolution has revealed NVN inconsistency in its policy towards reunification and the status of the communist-sponsored Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG). The provision for southern representation in the NVN National Assembly had been constantly portrayed as a manifestation by the North Vietnamese of their desire for reunification, despite their own protestations that the question is a matter to be decided freely in the future, namely after the war. It was also naively illogical for NVN to continue giving accreditation to those so-called "southern deputies" and at the same time recognizing the "legitimacy" of the PRG organized as early as June 1969. North Vietnam apparently sought to correct this basic anomaly by ending southern representation. Further, by implica-

tion the resolution suggests that Hanoi does not regard reunification as a matter of certainty in the immediate future.

The results of the April elections, particularly in respect of the percentages of votes received by the candidates, show a pattern radically different from those of previous elections and present a rather complex picture of the emerging leadership in NVN. According to available reports, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who is the Minister of National Defense and a VWP Politburo member, received the highest percentage of votes among the top-ranking VWP leaders; he received 99.54 percent of the votes cast in his constituency in Quang Binh Province. In Hanoi, VWP First Secretary Le Duan received 99.46 percent, which actually represents a slight decrease from the 99.83 percent he got in the 1964 elections. Premier Pham Van Dong obtained 99.30 percent of the Hanoi votes, closely followed by NASC Chairman Truong Chinh with 99.29 percent, which, again, is somewhat lower than his 1964 figure of 99.81 percent. President Ton Duc Thang obtained 98.89 percent only. However, what is surprising is that a number of lower-ranking party members and even non-party members received higher percentages than the VWP Politburo members. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of this situation happening during the lifetime of Ho Chi Minh. It was an established pattern then for Ho to get the highest percentage of votes throughout the country, well ahead of the other winning candidates. It is quite clear that up to now (almost two years after the death of Ho Chi Minh) no one among the present leaders has risen to the prominent stature achieved by the deceased President, thus leaving unfilled — possibly for some time — the leadership vacuum created by his demise. In another respect, the results tend to confirm the earlier-stated assessment that one of the objectives of the elections was to rekindle political consciousness among lower-ranking party members who have lately been indifferent to party affairs.

The results of the elections, particularly as they involve the top VWP Politburo members, assume further significance when viewed against the prevailing split in the party leadership. Despite attempts to conceal this split by a facade of unity and unanimity of views, it is well known that there are at least two factions in the VWP hierarchy. One faction, led by Truong Chinh, maintains that communist orthodoxy must be observed and followed at all costs. On war strategy, this faction is a strong advocate of Mao's theory of protracted guerrilla war which requires the employment of hit-and-run sapper tactics, and the use of small units. The other faction, composed of Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap, is more pragmatic and is thus prepared to take expedient measures even to the extent of compromising the Marxist ideology. Originally, this group was pressing for an allout offensive to resolve the war. However, following the failure of the 1968 Tet offensive, it has gradually accepted Truong Chinh's view of the war, hoping that the protracted guerrilla war will eventually wear down the enemy's resistance and will to fight.

At least by implication, the results show that the Le Duan group is steadily moving to the forefront, although there is little evidence that he himself is about to assume absolute control of the VWP Politburo members. Moreover, he is known to have considerable influence among the other members of the party in his capacity as First Secretary. This being the case, it is fairly reasonable to assess that there will be no immediate substantial modification in North Vietnam's internal and external policies, including its tactics and strategy in the Indo-China war.

(SEATO SECRETARIAT GENERAL)